Variation in body patterns in juvenile Eastern Brown Snakes *Pseudonaja textilis* at Epping, Victoria

On 7 September 2007, a preliminary survey of vertebrate fauna was conducted in an area of remnant Plains Grassy Woodland on the outskirts of Epping, approximately 23 km north of Melbourne.

The survey was commissioned by the City of Whittlesea and the purpose was to record the presence of any vertebrates and give an indication of other species that may inhabit the area. The site had numerous remnant and regenerating River Red Gum *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*, amongst several rocky knolls, with a sparse shrub cover of Hedge Wattle *Acacia paradoxa* and Tree Violet *Hymenanthera dentata*. The ground cover was a mixture of introduced and native grasses. The area was previously a grazing property, but is now surrounded by housing estates and other development, and eventually is to form part of an environmental reserve.

During an active herpetofauna search several species were found under rocks, including three Spotted Marsh Frogs *Limnodynastes tasmaniensis*, one Large Striped Skink *Ctenotus robustus*, nine Bougainville's Skinks *Lerista bougainvillii*, four Little Whip Snakes *Parasuta flagellum* and two juvenile Eastern Brown Snakes *Pseudonaja textilis*. The Eastern Brown Snake is widespread over most of Victoria, preferring dry, open habitats (Coventry and Robertson 1991), such as this site at Epping. The species thrives on the outskirts of large towns and cities in eastern Australia and appears to have benefited from land clearing (Wilson and Swan 2003). Both Eastern Brown Snakes had the usual black head and black nuchal bar that is typical for juveniles of the species (Cogger 2000). The first specimen (Fig. 1) had a plain body with no markings, but the second specimen (Fig. 2) had approximately 24 black bands on the body.

The Eastern Brown Snake is an egg layer and hatchling patterns can vary significantly (Cogger 2000). Shine (1991) stated that the banded and unbanded individuals may emerge from the same clutch and illustrated a one such occurrence. Cogger (2000) described juveniles with more than 50

Fig. 1. Juvenile Eastern Brown Snake: plain body.

Fig.2. Juvenile Eastern Brown Snake: banded body

bands and illustrated a specimen from Blacktown, NSW, with approximately 60 bands; Wilson and Swan (2003) illustrated a specimen from Brisbane with more than 50 bands. Gow (1976) illustrated a juvenile from an unknown location with approximately 67 bands and Swanson (2007) illustrated a juvenile from Sydney with more than 80 black bands.

The two juvenile Eastern Brown Snakes from Epping were found approximately 100 m apart and appeared to be about the same size, so it is likely that they were from the same clutch of eggs. Each snake was moved out of harm's way before the rocks were replaced in their original positions. Once disturbed both snakes displayed the aggressive behaviour typical for the species, writhing wildly and striking, before eventually moving back under the rocks.

Acknowledgements
Specimens mentioned in this note were handled under the terms of Research Permit No. 10004149 issued by the Department of Sustainability and Environment, and Approval No. 0207 of the Wildlife and Small Institutions Animal Ethics Committee of the Department of Primary Industries.

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